

HIGH WATER ¹

By A. W. SOMERVILLE

Two long-limbed, slovenly-clothed, dirty-faced and unshaven telegraph men waded through a foot or more of water to the business car. They halted below the observation platform, in the drizzle and mud and water, and held a consultation.

"You got the most education," said the chief; "I'll let you tell him."

"He might not believe me," demurred his assistant, "and I wouldn't think of assuming so much authority, besides. You tell him and I'll stand right behind you, near the door."

"When I start to leave," warned the chief, "don't get in my way. I might wanta hurry." They entered the business car. A negro porter appeared. "Where's the Old Man?" demanded the chief.

"Mistah Childress jes' now wen' to bed," objected the porter. "He done been up all night, las' three nights. You gen'mun bes' wait till he get up."

"You go tell him," said the chief telegraph man

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heartlessly, "that the wires are down between Adelaide and Cloudy Bend, and that we wanta know what he wants to do about it."

"Ah don' think it am advisable," objected the negro politely. "Yuh see, Mistah Childress he done tol' me profoun'ly not tuh wake him up 'foh suppah lessen it am a emergency."

"This," mimicked the chief, "am a emergency, see? Go get him up. And where," continued the chief, "do you keep the hot coffee, Dudley?"

"Yes-suh," said Dudley, "got plenty hot coffee. Right this way, suh."

He showed the way respectfully. The two telegraph men were served two steaming cups of black coffee and two thick sandwiches. They ate with big bites and drank in noisy gulps.

"Go wake Mr. Childress," ordered the chief.

"Ef yuh insists," said the porter, "Ah'll go get him up. Ah'll say Mistah Allbright he says de wires is down 'tween Adelaide an' Cloudy Bend, an' what mus' he do—am that right?"

"That am right," assented Allbright. "Hurry up!"

Dudley departed on his mission. A moment later a growl was heard from one of the state-rooms, followed shortly by a bellow. Dudley emerged with a wrinkled forehead and a meek but injured look in his eyes.

"De boss am sure mad," he confided. "He say

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somethin' about puttin' wires up. Heah he come!" Dudley disappeared toward the kitchen.

Mr. Childress stalked up. He ignored the telegraph men. "Dudley!" he bawled. He waited one-tenth of a half second. "Dudley!" he bawled again. He waited one-twentieth of a half second. "Where is that black scoundrel?" he demanded of no one in particular.

Dudley stuck his head unobtrusively around a corner.

"So there you are!" bawled the Old Man. "Do I have to wait all day for a cup of coffee? Everybody else around here gets coffee. Don't I get any? You got any more coffee?"

"Yes-suh," declared Dudley seriously.

"Well, don't stand there all day and talk about it!" shouted Childress. "Get me some!" Childress turned to Allbright. "What's the matter with your lousy wire?" he demanded.

"It's down," said Allbright briefly, "between Adelaide and Cloudy Bend."

"Put it up," said Childress ungraciously. Allbright grinned. "What're you laughin' at?" demanded the Old Man.

Allbright became serious. "The poles are twenty to twenty-five feet from the dump, some of 'em further," he answered. "We'll never get some of 'em up till the water goes down."

Dudley arrived with the coffee. Childress seized

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the cup, took a hefty swig, nearly burned the lining out of his throat. He glared at the retreating Dudley, took another swig.

"Why come an' tell me about it?" he snarled at the electrical men. "Go put something up—get us through somehow—that's what you're here for."

"We haven't any wire," replied the ill-smelling Allbright. He didn't smell any worse than the weary-eyed Childress; the business car *in toto* smelled like a wet pigsty. Business cars smell that way when the worn-out occupants flop down for a thirty-minute nap in soggy clothes covered to the belt line with mud and slime, when refugees from the high waters are given coffee, food and shelter until they can be got to safety.

"Haven't any wire?" demanded Childress crossly.

"No, sir," responded Allbright. "Used up the last we had today at noon running a line over to the telephone company to keep the line open through Ravenhead."

"How much wire you gotta have?"

"They're salvagin' what they can," answered Allbright, "but it's slow work. We lost sixteen thousand feet."

"What?" shouted Childress.

"Sixteen thousand feet," said the man gloomily. "Half of it's under water."

Childress drummed on the table before him. He

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sat down, shoved the coffee cup out of the way. He scratched several places that itched. Suddenly he raised his head sharply.

"Didn't we send about forty rolls down here for replacement on the branch?" he demanded suddenly. Allbright nodded. "Well, where is it?" came the aggressive demand.

Allbright said something about forty feet of water. A short fat man had entered and stood gulping down a sandwich as though he never expected to see food again. He was T. P. Patchbolt, division master mechanic. His bright blue eyes took in everything.

"Damn the water!" shouted Childress. "Here we got a million miles of drawn copper an' you holler for wire! You'd think it was ten feet of baling wire. Are ye afraid to get wet?"

"Listen, boss—" began the electrician.

"Listen, hell!" stormed the official. "Go get me that wire!"

"Listen, boss—" began the man again desperately.

"I'll listen to nothing!" answered the weary-eyed official. "You get that wire an' I'll listen to you. Understand? G'wan!"

The two telegraph men slouched out. Patchbolt started to follow them.

"Wait a minute, T. P.," said Childress. "I wanta talk to you."

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The fat man waved his hand. "I'll be back in two shakes," he declared. He joined the two men out in the drizzle. "The boss sounded like he was mad," he observed. The two men snorted. "Would you like to get the wire now," said T. P., "or would you sooner wait till it stops raining?"

"A government dredge couldn't get that wire out," said the younger of the telegraph men, named Carter. "The storeroom's forty feet under water, an' the storeroom's got a roof on it. A submarine might help."

"What's the idea in standin' out here in the rain?" demanded Allbright. "Let's get under cover."

"I know where there's some wire," said T. P. calmly.

"Lay off the humor," suggested Allbright.

"No foolin'," said T. P.

"Where?" demanded Allbright.

T. P. told them—down the branch on the cotton platform at Tudow—about Mile Post 4.

"You sure?"

"Positive," declared T. P. "Eight new rolls of wire. I was there when they stashed it."

"Let's get a boat," said Allbright.

"I gotta go back an' talk to the Old Man," said T. P. "You let me know how you come out."

"Sure will," declared Allbright. "Much obliged too."

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"Oh, don't mention it," said T. P. with a lordly gesture.

Allbright and Carter crossed the bridge, walked down the levee, came to the temporary wharf. There were two soldiers sitting in the comparative dryness of a rude shanty. Before the two soldiers were boats of all sizes and descriptions.

"Howdy," said Allbright.

"H'lo," said one of the soldiers suspiciously.

"We wanta get a motorboat," said Allbright. "We're railroad men. We gotta go down the Cad-jin Branch an' get some material."

"Do tell," said the soldier.

"No funny stuff," answered the tired railroader. "We gotta have a boat. If you can't let us have a motorboat, let us have anything—anything that'll float."

"Well, well," said the soldier, "did you hear him, Jake?" He spoke to the second soldier. "I do believe it's Mr. Hoover. And he wants a boat. I'm so sorry, Mr. Hoover, but the yacht just now broke a G string, an' Mr. Coolidge warned all of us personally not to let you take no chances. An important fellah like you oughtn't to take no chances. I'm so sorry, Herbert, but Mr. Coolidge would fire all of us if we let you take the yacht out when it's rainin' an' with a G string broke."

"Listen," said Allbright, "I wanta boat, see? I

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don't wanta argue about it—what I want is a boat."

"Herbert," chided the soldier, "you shouldn't be so venturesome."

"Maybe you don't understand," spoke up Carter. "We've got to get some wire up the branch, and the only way we can get up there is in a boat. We want that wire for our main line—we've got to have it."

"This must be Herbert's secretary," observed the second soldier.

"We gotta have a boat," said Allbright desperately. "You half-wits think this is a swell joke. Well, it ain't no joke. We gotta have a boat."

"Why, Herbert," soothed the first soldier, "how you do talk! Tut-tut!"

"Don't Herbert me!" exploded Allbright. "I want a boat, see?"

"On your way, bums," said the first soldier aggressively. "You nor nobody else gets a boat to go joy-ridin' in. Not with the levee about ready to come down around our ears."

The two boat seekers finally retreated to the bridge head and sat down. Allbright asked Carter if he had ever known a soldier who had any brains. Carter said he didn't care to know any well enough to find out.

T. P. came clumping down the track from the direction of the station. They hailed him.

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"I was lookin' for you," he said. "Get a boat?" They told him about the half-witted soldiers. "Yeah," said T. P. "Weather Bureau says she'll hit the top at six tonight. They commandeered everything, I guess. They wouldn't let Pershing have a canoe if he was here."

What could they do, demanded Allbright. T. P. fished a moldy cigar from his shapeless coat.

"Anybody got a dry match?" he asked. Allbright produced one from an old shotgun shell. "This cigar," said T. P., after much puffing and blowing, "don't seem to taste right."

Carter suggested that he squeeze the water out of it.

"This is one hell of a life," said T. P. moodily, looking glumly at the sad cigar.

"How we gonna get that wire?" demanded Allbright.

"I was just gonna suggest," said T. P., "that you boys come with me down the branch. I'm gonna take the 235 down there 's soon as she's hot."

Allbright and Carter gave him incredulous stares. "Say that again," said Carter.

"I'm gonna take the 235 down the branch," said T. P., "an' I'll take you two wire experts along with me if you wanta go—in about twenty minutes."

Allbright and Carter looked at each other. "I think he's crazy," said Allbright.

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"The strain's been too much for him," declared Carter.

"You're like a pair of old women," said T. P. "Now I'm goin' down the branch, an' what's more, I'm takin' a engine down there with me, an' I'm gonna bring out six box cars if I can, an' I don't know how many refugees on them box cars. While I was talkin' to the boss they phoned down from False River that a arryplane had seen 'em. So the boss says, 'T. P., we gotta get them people out.' An' I says, 'Boss, we sure gotta do that. But how we gonna do it?' I says. Then he says he wishes I wouldn't ask so many silly questions, but to see if I couldn't do somethin'. An' if I couldn't, to tell the soldiers down on the levee about it. So I went down an' told the nigger to get the 235 hot—she still had thirty pounds on her—an' I'm gonna hook a flat car behind her an' go down that branch. That's the dope. Now d'you wanta stay in good company?"

Neither of the men hesitated. "I'll go," said Carter.

"Me, too," said Allbright. "We've all gotta die some day."

"Fine!" said T. P. "We ain't gonna take no engine crew, no train crew. Ain't but one here—they need 'em here—an' I ain't got the gall to call a crew to go down that branch, nohow." They were

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walking down the track toward the station. They passed the station, came to the Y. Near the main-line switch stood the 235, a little ten-wheeled engine, a relic of better days. She was vomiting black smoke, with the blower kicking up an awful rumpus. The three men climbed into the shelter of the cab out of the drizzle.

The 235 was an oil burner. A negro sat on the left-hand side with one paw on the firing valve.

"What you tryin' to do, Jumbo—smoke up the parish?" demanded Patchbolt. "Get outta there an' let me fire this engine."

The negro slid off the seat hastily. T. P. adjusted the atomizer and cut down on the oil. There was one hundred and forty pounds of steam showing on the gauge.

"We'll go get some water," called T. P. to Carter. "Go let us out on the main line."

"Boss man," said Jumbo, "where is we gwine?"

"Goin' down the branch, Jumbo," answered T. P.

"De branch?" questioned Jumbo.

"The Cadjin Branch," answered T. P., reaching up and ringing the bell. He crossed over to the right-hand side and whipped two blasts out of the whistle. "Come here an' set her back for me," he ordered Jumbo.

They moved out on the main line, stopped.

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Carter threw the switch green, the negro threw the hand reverse forward for T. P. and they moved down to the water tank.

"Mistah Patchbolt," said Jumbo, "dis looks like a good place foh me to get off."

"You put some water in her," said T. P., "an' I don't much give a damn what you do. Get back there on the tank!"

The negro crawled back on the tank and helped T. P. spot for the spout. He then pulled the spout down over the manhole and yanked the valve open. T. P. found a piece of waste, pulled the oil-marker rod out of its slot, wiped it off, stuck it back down in the oil, pulled it into view again. It registered twenty-four hundred gallons.

"More than enough," he murmured.

A man in woebegone overalls came up the gangway. "Hello, Jim," said Patchbolt.

"Where you goin'?" demanded Jim.

"Down the branch," said T. P.

"What for?" asked the man.

"Refugees," answered the fat man.

"Oh," said Jim. He went over and motioned for Carter to get off the left-hand seat box. "I'll do the firin'," he said.

"We didn't call no crew," said T. P.

Jim shrugged. "I don't care," he said.

Jumbo came down from the tank above. "She's runnin' over," he reported.

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T. P. crossed over to the right-hand side, pulled on the whistle cord. They picked up a flat car on their way to the branch-line switch, hooked it onto the tank. Jumbo dropped off here. Jim, a fireman in regular service, was over on the left-hand side, firing the engine. They came to the branch switch, backing up with the flat car first. They would back up going down the branch; when they returned the engine would be going forward.

"See you later, Jim," called T. P., as they stopped at the switch. Carter swung down and went ahead to bend the rail.

"I think I'll stay with you," called Jim.

"You better stay here," answered the fat man. "I can make out all right. This ain't no regular call."

"That nigger can fire for Sam if I don't get back," answered the fireman, crossing over to the right-hand side. Carter had thrown the switch, the 235 moved off the main line, stopped in the clear.

"You understand," said T. P., "that you take your own chances. If the levee goes here, we're up the creek with no paddle. We go down as far as Sugarland if we can, an' there's two feet of water over the rails that I know of. There's about one chance in ten that we can get through."

"Sugarland," said the fireman—"that where the refugees are?"

"Supposed to be," answered Patchbolt. "The

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boss figures they were left-overs from the Raven-head crevasse."

The fireman nodded. "They can't stop us from tryin'," he said, and went back to the firing lever.

T. P. turned to Allbright. "Here's the dope," he said. "You an' your playmate go up on that flat car. You'll have to take turns walkin' ahead. Walk fast. If you get too tired, you let us know an' we'll try to help out. Jim here'll come up as soon as we see how she steams. I don't even know whether the dump's still here, but we'll find out in a few minutes."

Allbright climbed over the back of the tank, joined Carter on the flat car. Carter agreed to walk first. The engine backed up until the flat car came to the edge of the muddy water that hid the tracks, and Carter got off and walked up the flooded dump.

Ahead of them stretched a flat expanse of muddy water. Two feet under lay the branch-line dump and rails, and because of the danger of a washout that no one could possibly see, someone had to walk ahead of the train to make sure the engine and cars could pass over.

"Why don't you try to get those refugees out in a boat?" demanded Jim of T. P.

"It's forty miles around to Sugarland by boat," answered the fat master mechanic.

"Huh?"

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"You see," explained Patchbolt, "the only way to get in there is around by way of the river and down the crevasse at Ravenhead. Take a good boat to go down that crevasse. They can't follow our dump to Sugarland by boat on account of the old levee. We ain't in no danger unless the levee breaks in back of us; but, brother, if she comes through behind us, it's gonna be tough."

"No worse than some of 'em got," said the fireman somberly.

"That's true," admitted the fat man.

There was a steady swish-swish-swish of muddy water as they backed slowly down the branch. Both T. P. and Jim watched Carter closely. It wouldn't do to slip off the rails—it just wouldn't do. Although there was not more than two feet of water over the ties, it should not be forgotten that the dump was from eight to fifteen feet high. If the engine ever slid over the dump and lit in a soft spot, it would take a powerful lot of fishing even to find it, let alone rerail it. The branch line was built through a swamp.

Carter tired and Allbright took his place, and Carter came back to the cab to dry out. It was still raining—a cold, bone-chilling, spring drizzle. Allbright plodded along ahead of the little train.

After what seemed a long time, T. P. said: "You go up ahead, Jim. I can handle her; she's set about

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right." Jim climbed over the back of the tank, disappeared.

"Anything I can do, T. P.?" asked Carter.

"Yeah," said T. P., "get over on the left side an' watch those men up ahead. If any one of 'em says stop, holler your head off."

They went slopping through the water to the weak wuf-wuf-wuf of exhaust and the monotonous high-pitched roar of the blower. Allbright tired and they slowed, almost stopping, when the fireman took his place. Carter went back—or rather, ahead—to the flat car and Allbright came into the cab to dry out and get warm.

"Keep your eye on those men up ahead," ordered T. P.

They came to the cotton platform at Tudow, just past Mile Post 4, within the hour. The three men, Jim and Carter and Allbright, had taken turns walking ahead. All three were tired to almost utter weariness. None of them, including Patchbolt, could remember when a night of real sleep had been theirs. They were dirty of body and weary of eye.

Allbright was in the cab when they came to the cotton platform. "Let's stop an' put that wire aboard," he suggested.

"We'll pick it up comin' back," said T. P.

"Let's get it now," argued Allbright. "We may

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be drowned by the time we get back here. It'll be a supreme satisfaction just to get my paws on that wire."

Patchbolt grinned.

"All right," he agreed, "but throw your feet out. Go up an' tell Carter to bend that rail. We'll go right in the house track an' alongside the platform. Hurry it up!"

They moved very slowly onto the switch and into the house track.

"I'm a fool for doing this," muttered the fat man. "These lousy little house tracks wouldn't hold up a bag of beans. It won't hurt nothin', though, an' maybe it's a good hunch."

They oozed along the house track. All three men were wading through the water up ahead, checking up the track. The flat car came up even with the cotton platform, which stood well above the water. They stopped, spotted even with the little frame building at one end. T. P. cut his fire down and went up ahead to help.

Allbright kicked the padlocked door in with very few preliminaries. Allbright was a tough old veteran. The only job he had never tackled in the telegraph and telephone game was stringing submarine cable. Inside the shack they found eight rolls of wire—Number 9 copper wire, weighing two hundred and ten pounds to the roll and averaging

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about a mile in length. With the wire they found a pay-out reel. They loaded everything on the flat car.

They moved slowly back toward the branch main line, reached it without accident. Jim threw and locked the switch. Allbright went ahead, wading through the flood. Carter stayed on the flat car. Jim came up in the cab to dry out.

"It's only four more miles to the old levee and dry land," said T. P. "We'll be out of this slop from there till we get to Sugarland—I mean, jus' before we get to Sugarland. If those people are this side of Sugarland, we oughtta get 'em without no trouble."

"They won't be this side of Sugarland," said the fireman gloomily. "If they'd been this side, they'd of followed the dump back to the main line."

"Well," said T. P., "if they're below the old levee, I don't see how we can get to 'em. They tell me the Ravenhead crevasse cut a regular channel between the old levee an' Sugarland."

"That's what I heard," said the fireman moodily. The two men were silent for a moment. Finally Jim said, "We shouldda brought a boat."

"We couldn't get a boat," explained T. P. "Most all the boats went up to Ravenhead night before last when the levee busted there; what boats they got down around the bridge they won't part with. They think the levee's gonna go just east

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of the bridge, an' they're keepin' those boats to get the men out with."

Jim nodded gloomily. They slopped along through the dirty water.

"You live down here?" asked T. P.

"Yeah," said Jim shortly.

"Where?" asked the fat man.

"Just below Ravenhead," said Jim shortly.

"The hell!" said T. P. "Any of your people get caught?"

"I tried to find out," said Jim gloomily. "Nobody seemed to know. They took two relief trains out. I went through one of 'em—didn't see anybody. They may of been on the other one—I dunno."

"They?" questioned T. P.

"I'm a family man," said Jim gloomily.

They slowed, almost stopping, as Carter took Allbright's place in the lead. Jim went up ahead; Allbright came aboard shivering. The little ten-wheeler went slopping along. The three men changed places oftener now for the disagreeable task of wading ahead of the flat car. Carter was in the cab when they sighted dry land through the drizzling rain.

"That the old levee?" he called, pointing.

"That's it," said T. P. "It may not look like a monument, brother, but there's plenty of 'em down here that'd give a lot to be on it."

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"I guess that's so," agreed Carter.

They finally came to the levee. It was a tremendous relief to be able to see the rails again. Everybody came back to the cab. They would be on this comparatively high ground for eight miles, until they came to Sugarland. No one knew for certain what they would find at Sugarland, but everyone expected the worst.

T. P. was glad to cut the blower off; he was sick of hearing it. They were running fast enough now so the exhaust created enough draft to take care of the fire. T. P. held her with the independent air and worked a heavy throttle while Jim tossed four or five scoopfuls of sand into the fire box to clean out the flues. When they had been coming through the water the boot under the fire box had been covered, and the bottom air inlets of the fire pan might just as well not have been there. The little engine didn't seem to appreciate the treatment and it had been found necessary to smoke her heavy in order to get her to steam.

But they'd been lucky, thought the fat man, as they went rolling along—mighty lucky. If their luck held, they might get these refugees out. Rescue boats must have missed them. It might be that the rescue boats couldn't get to them. The flood did some funny things.

"How'd they know they was anybody out here?" shouted Allbright.

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"A arryplane saw 'em," answered the fat man.

"A arryplane," said Allbright. "H'm! So they fin'ly found a use for them things."

They came to the curve that led off the old levee onto the flats. There was a straightaway about a mile long before them, then nothing but water.

"I see something," called Carter. "Guess it must be the box cars."

When they came to the water's edge, all but T. P. were on the flat car. T. P. opened the whistle up for a long mournful bellow through the drizzling rain. The fat man left the air on service, methodically shut off the oil and the blower, left the atomizer barely cracked and clambered down. He proceeded to the flat car.

"Anybody on those cars?" he demanded, squinting through the rain.

"Somebody waved from up on top," declared Jim.

Over the yellow flood, slightly less than a half mile distant, could be discerned a short string of box cars. The fat man made out a figure on top the first of these cars. Near these cars was a small house, apparently turned over on its side. Beyond the box cars and the house, another half mile beyond, could be barely seen the refinery at Sugarland. The stack was easily visible, but little else.

"That's a woman on top that car," declared Carter.

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"I'm gonna walk down the dump," declared Jim excitedly, jumping off the flat car into the slop and the wet. Carter followed.

The fat man and Allbright watched the pair wade out along the dump. They advanced some fifty feet, when Jim, who was in the lead, suddenly dropped from sight. Carter pulled him back. The pair stood for a moment shouting, then turned and came back.

"No track," said Jim to T. P., looking down at the ground.

"Thought so," said the fat man.

"Strong current," supplemented Carter.

"We could hear 'em call," said Jim.

"Whose name were you yellin' out there?" asked the fat man.

The fireman hesitated. "That's my wife's name," he answered shortly.

"Wonder if his wife could be out there," thought the fat man. The flood did funny things. That was probably a woman on top that car. "They've been out in this hell for at least a night and a day," he thought. "They must have floated down on that house." Hello, there were two figures on top that car! Now there were three. One of 'em must be a kid.

"I can tell you what's happened," declared T. P. "The flood's cut the dump out between them and

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here, and it's cut it out between them an' Sugar-land. Those box cars are on a sort of island."

"How we gonna get 'em out?" demanded Jim.

"I can swim it easy," said Carter.

"He sure can," declared Albright; "he's a regular fish."

"That's a mean current," warned the fat man.

"I can make it easy," declared Carter.

T. P. was silent for a moment. "Could you take a wire across?" he demanded.

Carter grinned. "I'll give it a big try," he answered.

Albright slapped a heavy hand on a soggy thigh. "Here we go!" he cried.

Jim had been walking down to the deeper water. He returned. "Figure out a way?" he asked eagerly.

"Carter'll take a wire across," said T. P. "Says he can swim it."

"I can't swim," said Jim gloomily, as though accused.

T. P. clapped him on the shoulder. "That's all right, old-timer," he declared. They stood leaning up against the flat car. "Could you make out anything?"

"It looks like my house," declared Jim. "I won't leave here, Mr. Patchbolt, until we get 'em out."

"Don't you worry," said the master mechanic; "we'll get 'em out."

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Allbright and Carter had the pay-out reel on the track in front of them and had set a roll of wire on it.

"Don't let's get in too big a rush," said T. P. "We got to figure this thing out. That one wire ain't gonna get those people across. How stout is that wire, anyways?"

"We pull 'em up to four hundred pounds," answered Allbright promptly. "Four hundred pounds tensile strength. Got a big margin of safety too. If we hang five of these wires together, we can pull down a house."

"Let's get everything ready while we're all here," suggested T. P. "We ain't got but the one reel. It'll take a long time to unreel five of those rolls—six of 'em, if you count the one Carter's to take across."

"How d'you wanta do it?" demanded Allbright.

"If you think it'll work," said T. P., "we can anchor one end of the wire on the flat car and unreel it before you can bat an eye—run up the track about three-quarters of a mile. That's as long as they'll have to be."

Allbright grinned. "I never heard of no one unreeling telegraph wire with a locomotive before," he said, "but I'm willing to try it. Get up in the cab an' get ready; we're about all set."

T. P. clambered up in the cab and put a fire under the 235, and by the time he'd done that they

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were waiting on him. They had wrapped the free end of the wire around a stick, and Jim braced himself on the flat car and held this stick. Allbright and Carter held the reel and kept it running free, and they unreeled most of the first roll without a hitch. Allbright cut the wire when T. P. stopped on a hand signal, and they laid their product over to one side and stuck a fresh roll in the reel. Six times the 235 puffed up the track and returned, but they did the job in one-fifth the time it would have taken by hand.

Allbright and Carter bound five of the strands together at short distances and pulled the makeshift cable as far down the dump as they could. It wasn't a particularly beautiful cable, but it was strong enough to do the job for them. They brought the single piece of wire down to the end of the dump—the one that Carter was to carry across.

Carter slipped out of his soggy clothes, all except his underwear, took off his shoes. They bound the wire under his armpits, ran another piece over his shoulders so he couldn't lose his burden. After a hasty check-up, he slipped out into the dirty rain-specked flood.

Carter could swim, no question about that. He went angling across in an easy churning crawl; they paid out the wire behind him. Jim watched his every movement with anxious eyes. It seemed like

hours—in reality it was only minutes—before they saw him, vaguely through the drizzle, come to land near the box cars, saw him stand up in two or more feet of water. Three figures met him.

They hooked the five-strand cable onto the single wire and Carter pulled it across.

"I told him," said T. P. to Jim, "to pry off a couple of box-car doors an' hook that wire on 'em—or any kind of raft—it don't matter so long as it'll hold them people up. An', boy, when the 235 starts down the railroad we'll bring the whole works home." The fireman said nothing, only watched intently across the water. "If he can find somethin' to pry with," muttered T. P., "he oughtn't to have no trouble."

Carter had disappeared near the first box car; they could recognize him easily because of his white underwear. It was a long time to the watchers—particularly Jim—before he reappeared.

"He's got somethin'," called Allbright.

The white figure disappeared again, reappeared after another age. The watchers could make out the four figures near the cars; they could see the white figure bend and straighten up, bend and straighten up. They had agreed, T. P. and Carter and the rest, that it would be best were there no shouting or waving until the raft was ready. They saw the white figure straighten, saw him wave, heard his faint shout. The other figures were wav-

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ing too. Jim shouted in answer, T. P. and Allbright waved their hats.

"Come on, Jim!" exclaimed T. P., starting for the 235.

"You can run it," answered Jim excitedly. "I'm gonna stay right here!"

T. P. mounted to the cab, held the whistle cord down. Everything was set. The cable was hooked through a stake socket on the flat car. The fat man moved her ahead slowly, very carefully, half hanging out the cab window. Jim was giving him the go-ahead. "About ten miles an hour will do the trick," thought T. P., pulling the throttle a little wider. He could see Jim. The fireman was still giving him the highball. "He must want me to go faster," thought T. P.; "that current must be tough."

Jim was watching the makeshift raft with its burden of refugees breast the dirty water. Carter was swimming near it, losing distance apparently. No, he decided, Carter had hold of the back end of the raft.

The current caught the bobbing crazy craft with its human cargo, tipped it, swung it. Jim closed his eyes, turned, shouted and waved to T. P. to go faster. He turned to look at the raft again. He determined not to think who might be aboard. It was slipping downstream now, being carried downstream, but it was closer. There were still three

figures on board, with Carter trailing behind. He kept pace with the raft as it slipped downstream; it drew closer and closer. He shouted suddenly, shouted again, danced, ran down to where the raft would land.

T. P. was thoroughly disgusted. If that Jim ain't a punk fireman, he decided, then he had never seen one. They were on their way back to the main line. Everybody had forgotten about T. P. being on the engine; in fact they had forgotten that there was such a thing as an engine numbered 235 when the raft grounded. And since T. P. couldn't see anything because the raft had drifted down, the 235 had kept right on going and pulled that confounded amateur boat two or three hundred yards through the woods—all because Allbright and Jim got excited. A swell way to railroad, thought T. P. And Allbright had the gall to gripe about his wire being all busted up, as though he couldn't tie knots in it.

And every few minutes Jim's wife would say to her husband, "Honey, I never expected to see you again," and start to snifle. How was a man going to fire an engine properly with a woman hanging around his neck, thought T. P. indignantly, and a kid on the seat box with him? That woman with Jim's wife—a cousin; she better stay away from the right-hand side. He didn't have any time to

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monkey with women; if there was one thing that'd put the Indian sign on railroading, it was a woman.

They were rolling along the dry land near the old levee; they came to the flooded area. It was four P.M.; if their luck held, they would make the main line by six. T. P. was hungry enough to eat a car wheel.

There were seven people in the cab, most of them crowded up against the back boiler head. It was still raining. They slopped into the water, the rails disappeared. T. P. watched the main and side rods come up and go under, come up and go under. Slop, slop, slop. "Hell of a way to railroad," thought the fat man. The water came over the boot of the fire pan; T. P. reached over and opened the firedoor. The blower was wide open, but they were wasting more oil than they used.

"Hey, you," called T. P. harshly to Jim, "put some water in her!"

Jim grinned happily at T. P. and put the injector on. They went slopping along. After about an hour they came to the cotton platform. T. P. applied the brakes.

"Listen, boys," he said, "when we come through here before there was a current in three or four places. We'll have to do like we done before—walk ahead to see if there's any washouts. Can't take chances."

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There was a pause. It was very comfortable in the cab, out of the cold and drizzle.

"Well," said Allbright resignedly, "I'll lead off."

He went through the left-hand cab door, walked forward on the running board, descended over the pilot and walked up the flooded dump. The engine followed. Allbright walked—rather, waded—about a half mile and Carter took his place. Allbright came back to the cab shivering. After a little while, Jim arose.

"You watch the fire?" he called to T. P.; Patchbolt nodded.

"Where you goin?" demanded Allbright.

"I'll take Carter's place," said the fireman.

"Sit down," said Allbright, "an' stay here with your wife an' kid. Carter an' I'll do the walkin'."

T. P. came waddling across the cab deck.

"Get over there an' run her," he rumbled. "I'll walk." The fireman protested. "Git over there," rumbled T. P.; "I'm tired of arguin'."

So the fireman ran the engine and T. P. replaced Carter out on the flooded dump. Allbright relieved Patchbolt as they came in sight of the main line.

They were all in the cab again. Jim and his wife and kid were all crowded together on the left-hand side. The woman and the boy were half asleep. Allbright and Carter and the other woman were on

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the cab deck, sitting on the cab deck in front of the fire door. T. P. was running the engine.

He could see the main-line dump clearly now, could T. P. There was an engine working just east of the station, pulling some box cars down toward the bridge. The 368, he decided. They were certainly in one big hurry to get those cars across the bridge. He blinked. The light was failing, the drizzle continued. Those must be people at the bridge, he decided. He looked over at the main-line dump.

That couldn't be water cascading over the top of the dump. Why, the main-line dump was only a foot or so lower than the levee. But it was water. Almost before his eyes the bank dissolved under the main-line rails and ties, and the yellow flood was on them!

T. P. shouted and pointed, pulling the throttle wider. The branch-line rails curved to the right here and the break in the dump before them passed from his view behind the boiler. The water was rising, turbulent, under the cab. It covered the bottom of the fire pan, sizzling; it came flush with the mud ring as the steam filtered into the cab from below.

"Cut your fire off!" bellowed Patchbolt.

The track was wavering under their drivers, the cab was a blur of steam. They paralleled the main-line dump. The main-line washout slid slowly past

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the left-hand window and gangway. If the track would hold, they had a chance to get in, for the branch entered the main-line four hundred yards east of the washout. "Not too heavy on the throttle," T. P. warned himself. "If she slips off it's curtains for us all. Just a few hundred yards more—stay on the rails, old-timer. One hundred and twenty pounds on the gauge—that's enough for any flat car and some lousy copper wire."

The water was even with the belly of the boiler, almost flush with the cab deck. The wheels were covered—you couldn't see the rods, couldn't see the cylinders, couldn't even see the flat car behind them.

"Come on, old-timer," thought T. P., "they haven't got us licked yet."

Through the layers of steam in the cab T. P. could dimly make out the fireman, one arm about his wife, the other holding his kid. The two other men and the woman were jammed in the left-hand gangway, staring at the water, staring at the break in the dump.

T. P. shouted. Allbright came over. "We'll make the main line," said T. P., "if the track holds. I doubt if she'll pull up onto the main-line dump, but we'll get up close enough so we can walk up. You get these people off—see that they get across the bridge. The levee's gone on this side. The whole river's comin' through that break."

Allbright nodded. He crossed over, made sure

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the fireman understood. He talked to Carter—told him to take Jim's cousin over the bridge.

It was scary business, with the water sucking at the track beneath them. But suddenly the water receded and they went swinging up the incline toward the main line and safety. The 235 chuffed for the last time very solemnly and paid off. They straggled up the incline, the fireman carrying his youngster. "Never heard a whimper out of that kid," thought the fat master mechanic. They came to the top of the dump and T. P. made a bee line for the 368. Allbright was on his heels. Patchbolt clambered up the gangway of the 368.

"Let's take her down the branch lead, Sam," he cried to the engineer. "The 235's stuck; we can pull her out."

"I got orders to go no farther west than the station," answered the engineer.

"You got some new ones now," said T. P. grimly. "Let's get down there. This is an emergency."

"You take the responsibility?" demanded the engineer.

"Hell, yes!" announced T. P.

"Here we go!" said the engineer.

Allbright was standing behind T. P. "I'll throw the switch," he said.

T. P. nodded, looked over at the fireman's seat. A very scared darky sat on the seat box, one quivering hand on the firing valve.

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T. P. stepped over. "Get across the bridge, Jumbo," he rumbled. "I'll take your job."

The negro was down the gangway and gone before the fat man could sit down. They came to the branch-line switch. Allbright ran ahead and threw it; they went slowly down the grade and coupled into the 235. The water was over the valve stem, over the flat slide valves above the cylinders. They dragged her back to the main line, with the flat car behind.

A man swung up the gangway. He was the trainmaster. "What you doin' down here?" he demanded of the engineer.

T. P. came over. "We had to get the 235 out, Eddie," he explained.

"I ain't got nothin' to get out, I spose!" sneered Eddie.

"Well, whadda you want out?" demanded T. P. "Here we are."

"We'll get two coaches off the Y," snarled the trainmaster. "Step on it, Sam!"

They swung down on the Y. Allbright raced ahead to throw the switch. They hooked into the two day coaches, pulled them back on the main line. The dump was ready to slide from under the drivers; it was touch and go. Almost even with the break in the levee, only a scant hundred yards from where the yellow torrent was cutting the dump away in mammoth bites, they pulled the two

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day coaches off the Y and to safety. They backed down the main line and eased slowly across the bridge and the water beneath them was flush with the rails. They stopped on the east side of the bridge and watched the track they had come over eaten away, watched the station tilt up and slide from sight, watched the hungry river undermine the west piers of the bridge, watched the bridge itself slip majestically into the all-devouring flood—all in the space of less than thirty minutes.

“We don’t know how lucky we were!” declared T. P.

“Pretty lucky,” declared Allbright. “There was a couple of times when I didn’t think we was gonna get back with that wire!”

T. P. surveyed him in utter disgust. “Say,” he demanded, “don’t you realize we damn near lost a engine?”